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COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Eighteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 382nd MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Wednesday, 4 February 1998, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. KHAN

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

IMPLEMENTATION OF ARTICLE 21 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

1. Mrs. ROBINSON (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) said that she was pleased to meet with the Committee at a time when several major developments were taking place in the human rights field. The focus would be on the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights, the integration of human rights into the mainstream of the United Nations and the full participation of women as both agents and beneficiaries of development, in accordance with the priorities set down in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It was the practical realization of those objectives in coming years that would be the greatest challenge.

2. In his programme for reform, the Secretary-General had underlined that human rights were fundamental and integral to the promotion of peace and security, economic prosperity and social equity and were linked to the substantive programmes in those areas. He had created the structure for participation by the executive heads of all United Nations agencies in the mainstreaming of human rights as a core value, and that point would be brought out as the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was commemorated in the course of the year.

3. The human rights of women would be highlighted in the commemorative activities, as illustrated by the issuing of a basic information kit, "Women's rights: the responsibility of all", with contributions by both United Nations programmes and intergovernmental and non-governmental institutions and an outline of the activities scheduled for 1998. The study planned by the Committee on the status of reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, as its contribution to the commemorations, would bring out one of the problem areas.

4. 1998 would also see the five-year review of the implementation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action; a review that would, among other things, provide a good opportunity to make a thorough assessment of progress achieved so far with the regard to the human rights of women. The Committee's views and observations in that respect would be extremely valuable and would be studied attentively. As the Committee knew better than anyone, women still faced serious inequalities, both in law and in practice, and in virtually all societies and spheres of activity. Women constituted the overwhelming majority of those living in poverty and the majority of the world's illiterate. They worked more hours than men, their work remained mostly undervalued, and their participation in economic and political decision-making remained very limited.

5. It was her firm intention to make the struggle against such widespread gender discrimination a priority as High Commissioner, in partnership with all those acting in that area. Her Office would be undertaking to strengthen the human rights of women and integrate them into the broader framework of human rights; specifically, by campaigning for the universal ratification of the Convention and the removal of substantive reservations, increasing women's awareness of their human rights, advocating human development programmes that

promoted gender equality and non-discrimination and trying to strengthen the partnership between women's groups and human rights and non-governmental organizations. Progress in those areas would help to solve some of the economic and social problems that she had outlined.

6. Among the recent developments of interest to the Committee, the chairpersons of the human rights treaty bodies had, at their eighth meeting, given special attention to reform measures that would improve the effectiveness, efficiency and coordination of their work, particularly with respect to reporting and monitoring. They had urged the Committee to meet occasionally in Geneva to enhance its relationship with the other bodies, and she herself would welcome such a decision by the Committee. The rapid development of the human rights website had, of course, already led to a much better flow of information and documentation between all the treaty bodies, and the new link to the website of the Division for the Advancement of Women would increase coordination. The agreement that representatives of the Division would henceforth attend meetings of the pre-sessional working group of the Human Rights Committee in order to keep it informed about the activities of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women would also further harmonization.

7. The chairpersons had, moreover, asked the Division to prepare a background paper analysing what the various treaty bodies had done and could still do to integrate a gender perspective into their work, and had proposed holding another seminar on gender perspectives, similar to the 1995 meeting, to discuss the incorporation of the gender dimension into any revision of general comments, recommendations and guidelines previously issued by the treaty bodies. Furthermore, at the request of the Division, she would be assigning a substantive member of her Office to assist the working group of the Commission on the Status of Women in the elaboration of an optional protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and she intended to give high priority to the protocol.

8. The 1998 report by the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on violence against women had focused on State-perpetrated or -condoned violence, including custodial violence and violence against refugee and internally displaced women; and the Special Rapporteur had carried out a mission to Rwanda in 1997 to study the post-conflict situation of women, including those in prisons. The Commission's Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the territories of the former Yugoslavia had given special attention in her report to the use of rape as a weapon of war, and the Special Rapporteur of the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities on the situation of systematic rape, sexual slavery and slavery-like practices during periods of armed conflict would be submitting her final report at its next session. In addition, a recent report by the Commission's Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography contained a useful analysis of the impact of the media and of education on commercializing the sexual exploitation of the girl-child in particular. She herself, particularly after a visit to Cambodia in which she had seen first-hand the amount of money channelled into such exploitation and the terrible suffering of the girls involved, would give priority to the issues of violence and exploitation of children, for the most vulnerable were increasingly falling victim to such pressures.

9. As to the operations of her own Office, a specific project to integrate gender into all technical cooperation projects was now being implemented in the context of the review of technical cooperation in the human rights area. A detailed assessment had been made of some of the technical cooperation practices with respect to gender; the gender expertise of other United Nations technical cooperation agencies had been collected and collated; and the data had been reviewed, and draft procedures and guidelines developed and field-tested. Her Office had established a special team on gender and the human rights of women, in order to develop a more structured approach and ensure systematic gender mainstreaming in all its activities. The team had already had a good influence throughout her Office.

10. She reiterated her strong personal commitment to the promotion and protection of the human rights of women and pledged her fullest support for the Committee's important work, which was particularly significant in the implementation at the country level of the principles it sought to safeguard. The Committee was one of the basic mechanisms for setting benchmarks for economic and social rights and confronting human rights challenges. She hoped in coming years to work very closely with it.

11. Ms. CORTI said that the Committee regarded equality for women not as a utopia but as a challenge, and the High Commissioner would have its cooperation as she dealt with that challenge. She asked her to use every opportunity to give visibility to the Committee and to include it in the strengthened partnership between Headquarters and Geneva. She hoped the High Commissioner would follow the Committee's work on the amendment of the Convention, and consider convening all the human rights treaty bodies to study the problem of overdue reports and to eliminate overlapping activities.

12. Ms. BUSTELO GARCIA del REAL said that, as a long-standing member of the Committee, she was optimistic about its progress: the number of ratifications had gone up, its methods of work had improved, the reports it was receiving were better and more detailed, and its relations with non-governmental organizations were livelier. The Committee was open to discussions on ways to improve relations among the treaty bodies and introduce gender perspectives into their work. The new technologies would certainly facilitate such coordination.

13. Ms. SCHÖPP-SCHILLING said that, with the High Commissioner at the helm, new horizons would be opened, and cooperation between the Committee and the other treaty bodies would be encouraged. The issue of reservations by parties to the Convention was an important one, for a number of countries were in effect not complying at all because of their reservations to central provisions such as article 2 or article 16, and were failing to submit reports.

14. Ms. ACUIJ observed that the Committee was in the best position to appreciate the growing discrimination, violence, exploitation, economic segregation and poverty that were the lot of women throughout the world. A particularly repellent development had been the recent rise of fundamentalist religious movements that denied the elementary rights of women to life and to the education that would emancipate them. In the name of all suffering women, she asked the United Nations and the High Commissioner to work more forcefully

to help them. The visit of the High Commissioner was a sign of her commitment to the Committee's work.

15. The CHAIRPERSON expressed appreciation for the various initiatives announced by the High Commissioner and said that the Committee had begun work on its contribution to the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration and on achieving greater efficiency and coordination in its work.

16. Ms. KING (Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women) pledged the full support of the Division for the Advancement of Women and stood ready, as Special Adviser, to help achieve gender balance not only in the High Commissioner's Office but in the many human rights monitoring missions around the world that the Office was called upon to field.

The meeting rose at 3.35 p.m.